

NGERIAN PEOPLE AND CULTURE (GST 110 Class note i)

CONCEPTS OF NIGERIAN CULTURE AND CIVILISATION

Introduction

It is a triumph of mind over matter, of reason over instinct, and of the distinctly human over mankind's animal nature. These are what have made possible civilization, as well as culture, its constant and necessary companion. A thorough understanding of what civilization and culture are requires knowledge of all the qualities that make up human nature and a full understanding of all historical developments. Since this is not possible, it is necessary to explain these terms by the use of definitions and descriptions. Both civilization and culture are fairly modern words, having come into prominent use during the 19th century by anthropologists, historians, and literary figures. There has been a strong tendency to use them interchangeably as though they meant the same thing, but they are not the same.

Although modern in their usage, the two words are derived from ancient Latin. The word civilization is based on the Latin *civis*, "inhabitant of a city." Thus civilization, in its most essential meaning, is the ability of people to live together harmoniously in cities, in social groupings. From this definition it would seem that certain insects, such as ants or bees, are also civilized. They live and work together in social groups. So do some microorganisms. But there is more to civilization, and that is what culture brings to it. So, **civilization is inseparable from culture.**

The word culture is derived from the Latin verb *colere*, "to till the soil" (its past participle is *cultus*, associated with cultivation). But *colere* also has a wider range of meanings. It may, like *civis*, mean inhabiting a town or village. But most of its definitions suggest a process of starting and promoting growth and development. One may cultivate a garden; one may also cultivate one's interests, mind, and abilities. In its modern use the word culture refers to all the positive aspects and achievements of humanity that make mankind different from the rest of the animal world. Culture has grown out of creativity, a characteristic that seems to be unique to human beings.

One of the basic and best-known features of civilization and culture is the presence of tools. But more important than their simple existence is that the tools are always being improved and enlarged upon, a result of creativity. It took thousands of years to get from the first wheel to the latest, most advanced model of automobile.

It is the concept of humans as toolmakers and improvers that differentiates them from other animals. A monkey may use a stick to knock a banana from a tree, but that stick will never, through a monkey's ingenuity, be modified into a pruning hook or a ladder. Monkeys have never devised a spoken language, written a book, composed a melody, built a house, paved a road, or painted a portrait. To say that birds build nests and beavers their dens is to miss the point. People once lived in caves, but their ingenuity, imagination, and creativity led them to progress beyond caves to buildings.

Civilization, then, is the "city" of human beings, at any given stage of development, with all of its achievements: its arts, technology, sciences, religions, and politics. The word city may seem strange, but it is used advisedly because the emergence of a civilization and its cultural growth have always originated in specific localities—in specific cities, in fact. To speak in broader terms—of modern Western civilization, for instance—is to gloss over the fact that before such a concept was possible there were first the civilizations of Jerusalem, ancient Alexandria, Athens, Rome, and Constantinople. These in turn were followed by the civilizations of Florence, Milan, Venice, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Vienna, Geneva, Munich, New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and many more. If there is a Western civilization, it is made up of ingredients from all of these original city civilizations.

Nigeria is a West-African country bordering the Gulf of Guinea, between Benin and Cameroun. The capital of the country used to be in Lagos until subsequently relocated to Abuja in 1991. The name 'Nigeria' was suggested by a British journalist Flora Shaw in 1914 after the amalgamation of both Northern and Southern protectorates. This name 'Nigeria' was influenced by the Niger River which dominated much of the country's landscape.

Nigeria became an independent nation in 1960 October and subsequently became a republic in 1963. It currently practices a federal system of government as against

the initial parliamentary system. The first military coup took place on the 17th of January 1966 with counter coup six months later – a situation which later degenerated to a bloody civil war of 1967.

Nigeria is still a primarily rural country, with only 48 per cent of its population living in cities. Urban areas, however, doubled their share of the population between 1970 and 2006. The country has a long history of urban development, particularly in northern and south western Nigeria where substantial cities existed centuries before colonial rule. The largest Nigerian cities are Lagos, Kano, Onitsha, Enugu, Kaduna, Ibadan and the FCT, Abuja. Lagos, one of the world's largest cities, grew as colonial Nigeria's capital and leading port. Despite its loss of the federal capital in 1991 to Abuja, Lagos remains the country's economic and cultural center. Ibadan, founded as a 19th-century war camp, was the largest pre-colonial city in sub-Saharan Africa, thanks to massive rural-to-urban migration. Its economy is based largely on agriculture and trade. Kano grew to prominence as the center of a prosperous agricultural district and as a major terminus of trans-Saharan trade. It remains a major commercial, transportation, industrial, and administrative center. Other important cities include places like Ogbomoso, Oyo, and Ife; the Hausa cities of Zaria, Katsina, and Sokoto; and the newer, colonial-era cities of Jos, Port-Harcourt and Calabar.

RELIGION

Many religions are followed in Nigeria. Thus, the constitution guarantees religious freedom. Therefore Christianity is predominantly in the Southern part while Islam is the core religious practice of the Northern Nigerians. Native religions, in which people believe in deities, spirits and ancestors worship, are however spread throughout the country. Muslims and Christians may also intertwine their beliefs with more unorthodox indigenous ones. Some of the common deities include: Amadioha, Arò, Okeke, Anyanwu and Ikuku from Eastern Nigeria; while Ogun, Osun, Oya, Sango, Obatala, Egungun and Ifa oracle are some traditional gods in the Yoruba (South-Western part) part of the country. In Kogi state, among the Ebira, Igala, Nupe, Okuns and Ebira-Koto respectively, they worship Egbunu, Ishepa, Egu

The major Christian celebrations are Christmas and Easter (which goes with Lenten fast) while Muslims observe Ramadan (fasting) and the two Eids. All of these celebrations are observed with national public holidays. Northern Muslims do not actively work on their weekly prayer day (Friday), while Christian south hold their holiday on Sunday.

Adherence to Islam, Christianity, or indigenous African religions is central to how Nigerians identify themselves. Religious affiliation estimates vary, however, due to the lack of census data and the fact that many of Nigeria's Muslims and Christians adhere to beliefs and practices associated with indigenous religions. Recent estimates suggest that 50 percent are Muslims, 40 percent are Christians, and 10 percent adhere to traditional religions.

In the late 19th century, Christianity became established in southern Nigeria. In the Yoruba southwest, it was propagated by the Church of England, while in the Igbo southeast the Roman Catholic Church dominated. Today, close to half of the southwestern peoples and far more than half of the southeastern peoples are Christians, divided into Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, and Baptist sects. Christianity is also widespread in the middle belt, but it is virtually absent in the far north except among migrant populations. In recent years, Protestant fundamentalism has grown, particularly in the middle belt. Nigeria also has many independent African churches, such as Cherubim and Seraphim, which incorporate African cultural practices such as drumming, dancing, and *polygyny* (multiple wives) into Christianity.

NATIONAL PRIDE

Nigeria is varyingly considered the super power on Africa continent and consequently the people generally proud ones. It has the largest population of Black concentration anywhere in the world with the strength of about one hundred and seventy million (170,000,000) citizens. It is also considered the largest contributor to the United Nations and ECOMOG peace keeping missions in Africa.

The nation is endowed with vast quantity and quality of natural resources and it is the sixth largest oil-producing nation in the world as well as properly educated and

industrially developing society.

Nigeria's defense forces, which peaked at 300,000 at the end of the civil war in 1970, had 78,500 personnel in 2004, which was still large and expensive compared to the region's other countries. Nigeria has participated in peacekeeping operations of the United Nations (UN). It has also provided the majority of soldiers for the joint West African peacekeeping force in Liberia (since 1990) and Sierra Leone from 1997 until 2000, (when a UN peacekeeping force that included many Nigerian troops took over). Military service in Nigeria is however voluntary.

THE FAMILY: Extended families are still the norm and are in fact the backbone of social system. Grandparents, Uncles, Aunts, Sisters, Brothers etc all work as unit through life. Family relationships are guided by hierarchy and seniority. Social standing and recognition is achieved through extended families. Similarly, a family's honour is influenced by the actions of its members. Individuals turn to the extended family for financial aids and guidance; and the family in turn is expected to provide for the welfare of every member. Although the role of the extended family is diminishing somewhat in the urban areas, there remains a strong tradition of mutual caring and responsibility among members.

HERACHY

Nigeria is a hierarchical society. Age and position earn and demand respect. Age is believed to confer wisdom, so older people are granted respect. The oldest person in a group is revered and honoured. In a social situation, they are greeted and served first. In return, most senior person has the responsibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of the group.

COMMUNICATION STYLES

Due to ethnic make-up of the country, communication styles vary. In the south-west, where the people are from the Yoruba tribe, people's communication employs proverbs, sayings and songs to enrich the essence of what they say. This is especially true when speaking their native language; though, many of this characteristic has been carried in their use of English usage. The Yoruba often uses humour to prevent

boredom long meetings or serious discussions. They believe that embedding humour in their message guarantees that what they say is not readily forgotten.

Nigerians living in the south of the country tend to speak more directly. It is also noted that their tone is slightly louder than people elsewhere. They may raise their voice and become emotionally excited when they feel passionately about a topic. However, a harsh tone is considered unwelcoming and even hostile. Nigerians prefer facial expressions that imply empathy and believe that indifferent facial expression indicates ignorance or detestable feelings.

Communication commences with informal enquiries of family and personal welfare. Such social niceties go a long way in soft-landing. Therefore, foreigners who take the time to get to know a Nigerian as a person are considered friendly and welcome into Nigerian's inner circle of family and close friends.

Communication in Nigeria may also be indirect and rely on non-verbal cues. Parents sometimes use gestures when communicating with their children. People may smile to mask their true feelings especially when disappointed, confused or embarrassed.

ARTS AND LITERATURE

Nigerian culture reflects African, Islamic, and European influences. In northern Nigeria, Islam has shaped architecture and calligraphy. As Islam traditionally forbids the representation of people and animals, art forms such as ceremonial sculptures are virtually absent in the north. In the south, indigenous peoples produced their own art long before Europeans arrived. Portuguese figures first appeared in Benin bronzes dating to the 16th century. Since the dawn of the colonial era, Western influences have challenged, threatened, and in certain ways enriched Nigerian culture.

Nigeria's modern literature grows out of a tradition of storytelling and historical remembrance that has existed for millennia. Oral literature ranges from the proverbs and dilemma tales of the common people to elaborate stories memorized and performed by professional *praise-singers* attached to royal courts. In states where Islam prevailed, significant written literatures evolved. The founder of the Sokoto caliphate, Usman Dan Fodio, wrote nearly 100 texts in Arabic in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. His prose and poetry examined issues such as good

government and social relations from an Islamic moralist perspective. The legacy of this Islamic tradition is a widely read modern literature comprised of religious and secular works, including the Hausa-language poetry and stories of Alhaji Abubakar Imam.

Nigeria's rich and diverse artistic heritage goes back more than 2,000 years. The earliest noteworthy pieces are finely produced terra-cotta sculptures produced by the Nok culture in the vicinity of the Jos Plateau between 500 BC and AD 200. These, together with bronze heads from Ife dating from the 13th century and bronze plaques, bronze statues, and ivory carvings from Benin from the 11th century and later, are generally considered Nigeria's most important artistic legacy. Many such pieces, however, reside in Western museums, where they were taken during the time of colonial conquest. The Nigerian government has demanded the return of looted art, particularly from Benin, with little success.

Also important to Nigeria's artistic heritage are wooden masks and *fetishes* (objects of worship or ceremony). Some of the finest examples are from cultures such as the Ijaw, Ibibio, and Igala from southeastern Nigeria. Authentic examples of this art command high prices from collectors in the West, accounting for the frequent theft of ceremonial objects from shrines and museums in Nigeria. Modern artists typically draw on both African and Western influences. Members of the Oshogbo School, founded by Ulli Beier in the early 1960s, have explored Yoruba spirituality in several media. Leading Oshogbo artists include painter and musician Taiwo Olaniyi, also known as Twins Seven Seven; painter and writer Amos Tutuola; and sculptors Asiru Olatunde, Adebisi Akanji, and Susanne Wenger Alarape. The development of modern Nigerian art has also been strongly influenced by students of the Zaria and Nsukka schools, dating respectively from the late 1950s and early 1970s. The Zaria school first explored the possibilities of synthesizing themes and techniques derived from both traditional and modern sources. The Nsukka School produces work that is known for its strong social and political content.